

# A MEDIEVAL CEMETERY AT MACKNEY COURT FARM, BRIGHTWELL-CUM-SOTWELL

GLADYS PIKE

IN MAY 1962 Mr. J. Rickards of Mackney Court Farm, Brightwell-cum-Sotwell, reported the discovery to Reading Museum of some human skeletons in the garden of one of the farm cottages. Mr. C. Gunning of No. 3 The Cottages had exposed two skeletons while digging a rubbish pit. A visit to the site by Mr. J. J. Wymer of Reading Museum showed that there was nothing to indicate the date of the burials so some investigation was desirable. An excavation was therefore conducted by the author and four other members of the Berkshire Field Research Group during the week-ends May 5th to July 16th, 1962.

The skeletons first exposed by Mr. C. Gunning (nos. 1 and 2) were found to be those of a man and woman, presumably man and wife, placed in the arms of a U-shaped grave, dug through subsoil and about 5 inches into natural chalk. Further excavation revealed that this unusual grave was surrounded by others of normal rectangular shape. Nine undisturbed graves were excavated and nine others located. The graves were all laid out in an approximately east-west direction, arranged in straight rows. The skeletons were of men, women and children of a wide age range and a report below by Mr. H. Carter of Reading Museum contains details of the skeletons and suggests family relationships between several of them.

A well was found between two of the graves (nos. 3 and 4) and filling produced a valuable collection of late 13th-14th century pottery and a few other objects. Several lines of evidence, described below, indicate that the cemetery was that of the Mackney family from the 14th century.

## EXCAVATION OF THE CEMETERY

It seemed certain that the site was a Christian cemetery, for not only was the East-West position of the graves diagnostic, but the fill in and above the graves contained a quantity of medieval pottery. (One or two Romano-British sherds (Fig. 3 Nos. 6, 7 and 9) were distinguished, but the presence of such sherds is typical of the Mackney area). Two sherds, one medieval and one Romano-British, were actually washed from the soil adhering to the vertebrae of Skeleton 5. Large iron nails, presumably coffin-nails, outlined Graves 1, 6, 7 and 8.

The topsoil at the East end of the easternmost cutting consisted of 1 ft. 10 in.-2 ft. of black sandy material composed of ancient and modern rubbish in various states of decay. From about 24 ft. from the East wall this black humus was gradually replaced by more normal garden soil which was not investigated.

Directly beneath the humus was a single layer of brown pebbles, approximately 3 in. in diameter, spread at irregular intervals. At about 2 ft. from the N.E. corner of this cutting was a single layer of these pebbles, very densely packed, stretching for some 4 ft. along the eastern face of the box. If this close-packed "path" extended into the cutting it had been removed before the excavation began. It was not visible in

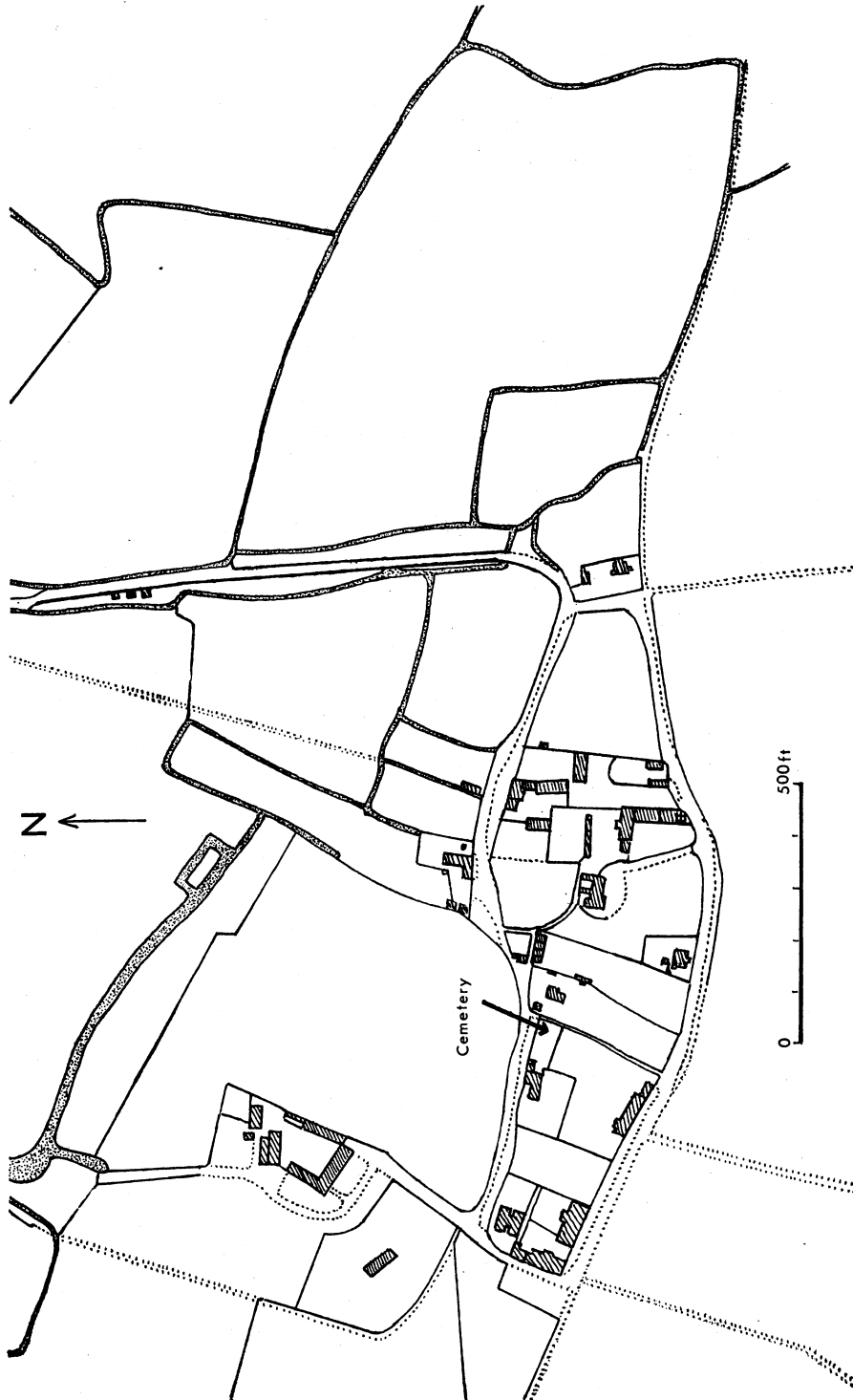


Fig. 1. Position of the cemetery at Mackney Court Farm, Brightwell-cum-Sotwell. (National grid SU 580 899).  
(Based upon the Ordnance Survey Map with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office, Crown Copyright Reserved)

the West face. Under this was a layer of rotten chalk of varying depth, much disturbed by rubbish-pits. Flat pieces of chalk, about 1 in. thick lay directly upon the natural chalk at a depth of 1 ft. 10 in.—3 ft. below ground level.

A well, 17 ft. below ground level and 42 in. in diameter had been cut between the graves of Skeletons 3 and 4, leaving small baulks of chalk 6 in. and 4 in. thick respectively. This well had been cut to a cylindrical shape down to the last 12 in. when it tapered towards the centre. The fill contained a large number of pieces of worked wood, fragments of a turned wooden platter, an iron buckle and sherds of pottery which were similar to those found in and immediately over the graves.

### *Extent of the Cemetery*

A resistivity survey, conducted by Mr. W. H. Manning, of the Archaeological staff of Reading Museum, was inconclusive owing to the high conductivity of the topsoil. After Mr. Gunning had abandoned the garden a trial trench was dug from the garden path towards the fence some 49 feet from the East wall toward the South wall and Skeleton 18 was found in line with Skeletons 13–15. It was obvious that the cemetery extended at least as far as the southern boundary of the garden.

It seems certain that the lower part of the legs of Skeletons 10 and 11 extend under the public footpath beyond the East wall. A human skull is reported to have been found in the garden of the next-door house in 1960, so that the graveyard should also extend in an easterly direction.

A pit, dug by Mr. Gunning some 3 feet beyond the second cutting, revealed a mixture of human and animal bones, lying in a very disturbed state, in the soil above the chalk. The soil is very thin towards the house and the bones had probably been raised by digging. It is possible that the graveyard extended as far as, and even under Cottages 3, 2 and 1 Mackney Court Farm.

### POTTERY

The overwhelming majority of the sherds were found in the well and are of late 13th–14th century date.

The close proximity of the graves containing Skeletons 3 and 4 to the well suggests that they were cut later, and the similarity of the pottery from graves and well indicates that the well was filled in when the graves were dug. The fill from the last 2 feet of the well was carefully sieved owing to waterlogged conditions, but the pottery proved to be no earlier than that from the upper 15 feet of the well, which may be presumed to have existed for a short space of time.

The pottery in and immediately above the graves was of the same period. Of the Romano-British sherds, No. 10 was from the well, and the rest from the filling of the graves. All the medieval pottery described below was found in the well.

### *Glazed Ware*

Several types of bowl and pitcher, as well as a square or rectangular bowl were recognized. A section of the pottery is illustrated (Fig. 3 nos. 2, 4, 8, 11).

*No. 4.* A shallow bowl, 12½ in. in rim diameter, 8½ in. base diameter. Probably 3¼ in. deep.

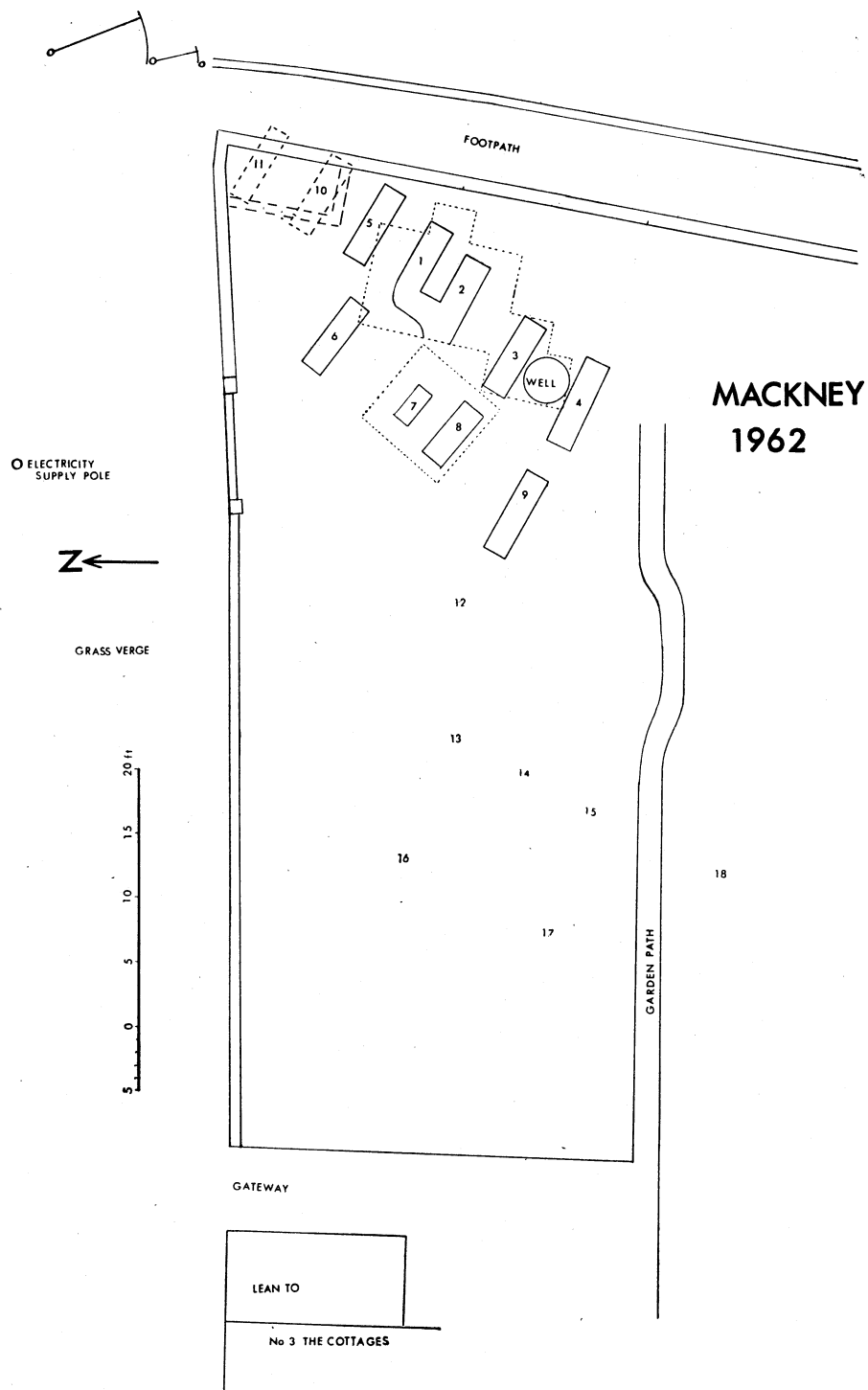


Fig. 2. Plan of the graves found in the cemetery at Mackney Court Farm, Brightwell-cum-Sotwell. The areas enclosed by the dotted lines excavated May-July, 1962.

Smooth, well-fired red ware with an internal white slip decoration and clear glaze. Single groove inside,  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. from the rim.

*No. 2.* A pitcher with a  $4\frac{1}{4}$  in. rim diameter. Smooth, well-fired pinky-buff ware with grey centre and a slightly rough surface on the inside.

*No. 11.* A pitcher with a 6 in. base diameter. Smooth, well-fired pinky-red ware with a slightly gritty internal surface. Applied decoration covered with a mottled green glaze.

The inside of the base was cut away to reduce the thickness of the clay, leaving coarse groove marks.

*No. 8.* A square or rectangular dish with  $1\frac{3}{8}$  in. walls.

Smooth, well-fired grey ware, pale buff on the surface, with a light olive internal glaze.

### *Unglazed Ware*

There were sufficient diagnostic sherds from three bowls to warrant reconstruction. One sherd of a mortarium was also found.

*No. 1.* Bowl with  $5\frac{1}{2}$  in. rim diameter, 5 in. base diameter, height 4 in.

Smooth well-fired red ware, fired to a brown-black on the outside.

*No. 3.* Bowl with 5 in. rim diameter,  $4\frac{1}{2}$  in. base diameter,  $4\frac{1}{8}$  in. high.

Smooth, well-fired red ware, fired to a brown-black on the outside.

*No. 5.* Bowl with  $7\frac{1}{2}$  in. rim diameter,  $8\frac{1}{4}$  in. base diameter,  $6\frac{1}{2}$  in. high.

Coarse, badly prepared grey ware, with large pieces of grit in the paste. Hand-made. Very uneven in the thickness of the walls. Not symmetrical, with a saggy rounded base, unevenly fired to a reddish-brown colour round part of the rim, but mainly brown-black.

### *Romano-British Ware*

*No. 6.* The base of the bowl of smooth grey ware with incised decoration  $\frac{3}{8}$  in. from base.

*No. 7.* Rim of a Samian bowl.

*No. 9.* Rim of a bowl of smooth grey ware similar to *no. 6*.

*No. 10.* Sherd of hard, light buff ware with incised line decoration.

### RECORDS

A chartulary of ill-repute, but probably containing genuine material, compiled at St. Swithuns, Winchester, in the 12th century A.D. suggests that a church existed at Mackney in late Saxon times and that it was included in a gift of land made by King Edred to his thegn Ethelgard in 948 A.D. (*Berks., Bucks. and Oxon. J.* Vol. 11, pp. 108-112).

Mackney was not mentioned in the Domesday Survey as it was part of the Bishop of Winchester's manor. This overlordship was also recognized in the time of Henry III (1216-1272) and Edward II (1307-1327).

Individual tenants attested by name are:

Thomas de Mackney

Ralph de Mackney (son of Thomas)

No date

1196

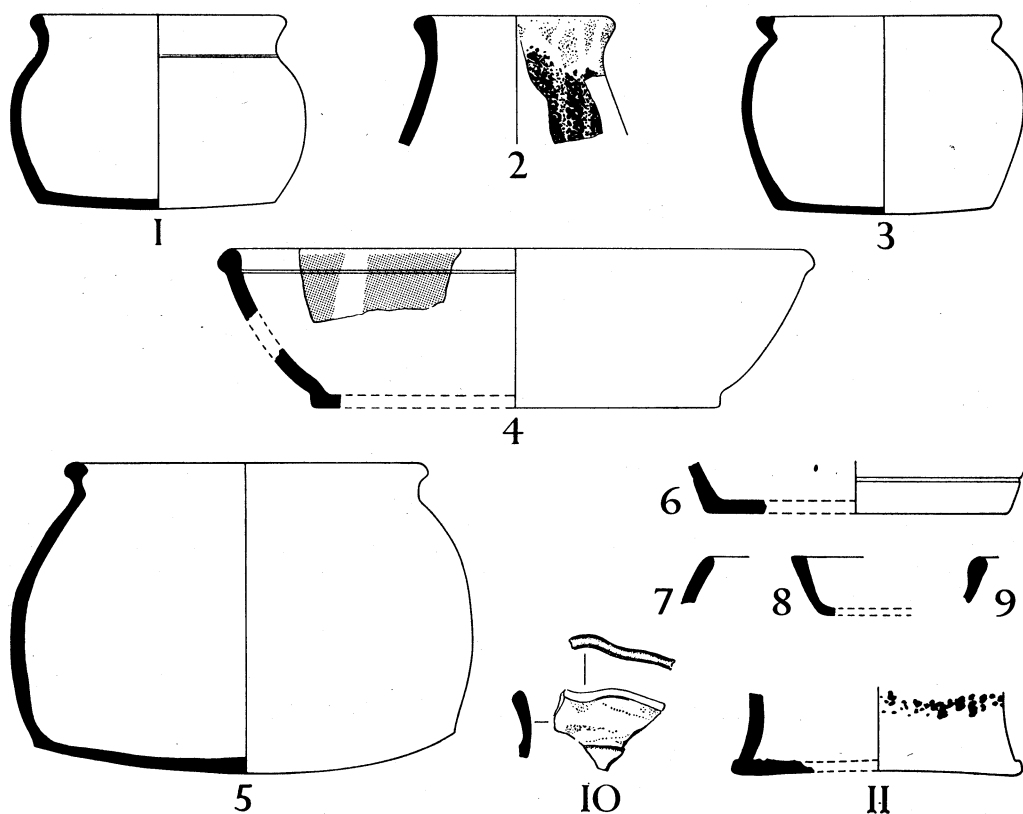


Fig. 3. Pottery from Mackney Court Farm (4)

*Medieval:* nos. 1-5, 8 and 11 (2, 4, 8, 11 glazed) all from the well

*Roman:* nos. 6, 7, 9 and 10 all from the fillings of graves except no. 10 which was from the well.

Ralph de Mackney	No date
Robert de Mackney	1253
William de Mackney (nephew of Robert)	1298
Rowland Hastings	1320
William de Mackney	1350

Mackney was now an independent manor. (*Victoria County History III Berkshire* (1923), p. 467).

### CONCLUSIONS

- The cemetery belongs to the 12th-13th century when the de Mackney family were tenants of Winchester.
- At least two closely related family groups are buried there.
- The presence of coffin-nails in several of the graves suggests that the occupants were people of some standing, as coffins were not usually buried with persons of low degree e.g. cottars, villeins and serfs during the medieval period.

## CEMETERY AT MACKNEY COURT FARM

## REPORT ON THE SKELETONS

H. CARTER, M.A., B.SC.

TABLE I

<i>Summary of Bionomic Data</i>							
<i>Skeleton</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Est. Ht.</i>	<i>Est. Age</i>	<i>Dental Group</i>	<i>Longer Arm</i>	<i>Abnormalities</i>	<i>Injuries</i>
1	Male	5' 7"	Adult		Right		Right Humerus
2	Female	5' 3"	Adult		Right	Supracondylar Process	
3	Male	5' 6"	30	I	Right		
4	Female	5' 5½"	18	II		Metopic Suture	Left Radius (?)
5	Female	5' 3"	17	II			Left Femur
6	Male	5' 7"	25	II	Right	Metopic Suture	
7	Baby		1½		Left	Supracondylar Process	
8	Female	4' 11"	15	IIa	Right		
9	Male	5' 4½"	17		Right		

*Family Grouping*

To obtain some guidance on the genetic relationships in this group certain factors which are known or may reasonably be supposed to be genetically controlled were considered.

*Teeth*

Overcrowding of the teeth in the upper or lower jaw or both is at least in part genetically controlled. The skeletons can be divided into three dental groups as follows:

*Dental Group I*

Upper front teeth more crowded than the lower, slight overbite.

*Dental Group II*

Upper front teeth less crowded than the lower, slight overbite.

*Dental Group IIa*

As II, but crowding more marked, overbite pronounced.

*Metopic Suture*

This is a suture dividing the frontal bone of the skull into left and right halves, and is present normally (as in Skeleton 7) up to the age of two or thereabouts. In some individuals it persists until the general closure of the sutures in middle age. This abnormality is inherited as a simple Mendelian dominant, so that if a person inherits it from one of his or her parents and marries a person who is free from it, about half their children will both show and transmit it. It occurs in about 9% of the population of this country (Iron Age and Modern), 8½% of Germans (Brothwell, "*Digging Up Bones*," *Brit. Mus.* 1963, table 3). There is thus a 0.8% probability of finding two metopic skulls in chance association (i.e. from unrelated individuals) among the six adult and adolescent skulls from Mackney Court.

*Supracondylar Process*

This is a hook-like projection on the inner side of the humerus. Apparently nothing is known of its mode of inheritance, if any, nor of its frequency in different populations. As far as my own limited experience goes, it is less common than persistent metopic suture.

It is likely to be hereditary, and it is used here as an indication of close family relationship.

*Proportion of limb bones*

The following ratio have been used:

TABLE 2

<i>Skeleton</i>	<i>Humerus-Femur</i>	<i>Humerus-Radius</i>	<i>Tibia-Fibia</i>
1	73.5%	76.2%	82.4%
2	73.4%	72.4%	80.9%
3	74.2%	73.8%	79.3%
4	68.7%	76.0%	78.4%
5			
6	70.9%	75.5%	76.7%
7			
8	75.5%	72.8%	
9	69.2%		79.3%

The lengths of the bones of an individual are partly genetically controlled and in part reflect diet and other aspects of living conditions. It seems unlikely that there was any marked divergence in the living conditions of an agricultural population such as one would expect to find in the environment of Mackney Court.

This is borne out by consideration of the range of heights, growing individuals being excluded. Males vary from 5 ft. 4½ in. to 5 ft. 7 in., females from 5 ft. 3 in. to 5 ft. 5½ in., a range of only 2½ in. in each sex.

TABLE 3

<i>Group</i>	<i>Dental Group</i>	<i>Suggested subdivision of the sample</i>					<i>Skeletons</i>
		<i>Met. Sut.</i>	<i>Sup. Process</i>	<i>Ratio R:H</i>	<i>Ratio T:F</i>	<i>Ratio H:F</i>	
I	I	none	67%	72-74	79-81	73-75	2, 3, 7.
Ia		none	none	76	82	73-74	1
II	II	50%	none	75-76	78-79	68-69	4, 5, 6.
IIa	IIa	none	none	73		75-76	8

Unclassified: Mandible of 6-year-old child.

*Acknowledgements*

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Mr. D. Lingwood drew and restored some of the pottery, and Mr. H. Carter provided the report on the skeletons.

Thanks are also due to Mr. W. H. Manning who conducted the resistivity survey.

Finally, this excavation would not have been possible without the friendly co-operation of the Gunning family and of Mr. J. Rickards of Mackney Court Farm.

Permission to dig was given by the owner, Mr. H. Curtis.